

Leon Trotsky-The Man and His Work

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"Lenin is the reflection, the image of the (Russian) working class, not only in its proletarian present, but also in its still more recent proletarian past. . . He absorbed from the national milieu, all that he needed for accomplishing the greatest revolutionary action in all history . . ." Thus Trotsky characterized the founder of Bolshevism, and it is thus that Lenin appears today. Lenin and Bolshevism could not have been born except as an outgrowth of the whole of Russia's ancient past... An imperialism that combined the defects of autocracy with its own special defects, developed so as not to breed the illusion of pacifist evolution, which gripped the workers' aristocracy of the Western countries. There wasn't a trace of fatalistic passivity in Lenin, and it could not have been otherwise; the leader of the Russian revolution from his youth was oriented toward action. In fact, Lenin's life is a most striking example of the concentration of all the forces of a personality toward the realization of the historical objective of the class. The leaders of the Western working class movement were unable to view Lenin before 1914 as anything but an incomprehensible trouble-maker; after 1914, for the most part, they hated him as an implacable enemy.

Trotsky was different. In spite of a childhood spent on a farm, he was influenced not so much from the peasant forces of his people as from the living forces of the imperialist world's great capitals to which his first two emigrations took him: London, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Madrid, New York. Of all the great Russian revolutionists he was without doubt the most "European," the one who absorbed Western civilization most thoroughly, who impregnated it with that revolutionary dynamism which existed intact within the Russian working class; and thus succeeded in giving it its highest expression in this century.

With Lenin, action is the natural expression of his being and, starting from the concrete, inscribes itself on a body of ideas from which it remains inseparable. With Trotsky, action is the natural fulfillment of thought which seizes the concrete on the wing without ever letting it go. There is here only a shade of difference but it is this nuance which gives a finished maturity to their collaboration beginning with 1917.

These two giants did not live the simple life of legendary heroes. "Only incurable philistines imagine Lenin as a saint who never made a mistake," said Trotsky on this subject. Their faults and errors are closely linked with their profound natures. There is in Lenin, in his writings of 1905, in his ideas before 1917 on the nature of the Russian revolution, a reticence to leave the realm of the immediate, to push to its end the concept of the proletariat as the motivating force of the revolution. Not to exclude in advance the possibility of a revolutionary alliance between the proletarian party and an eventual party resting on the peasantry, meant for Lenin not to eliminate in advance the most immediate, direct, and least hazardous way of achieving the overthrow of the autocracy. This error, however, remains at all times within the framework of his revolutionary temperament. He could not have anything in common with Menshevism, which likewise characterizing the Russian revolution as being confined at first to the boundaries of the bourgeois revolution, surrendered to the "liberal" bourgeoisie (nonexistent, said Trotsky,

and events proved him to be right!) — the leadership of the historic process. His will, rigorously turned toward the solution of every "theoretical" problem was still too hidebound to be able to conceive of the immediate conquest of power by the proletariat. Twelve years later, when Trotsky's theory was realized, thanks to the leadership of Lenin, he did not hesitate for a single instant to make the necessary turn in ideas as in action, but did he not say at the decisive moment that "this gave him vertigo?"

Trotsky, for his part, standing politically at the opposite pole from Menshevism, was for a long time led astray by a too great confidence in the possibilities of uniting divergent political currents by purely intellectual persuasion. It is true that with a stroke of genius, he formulated, while still very young, his concept of the Permanent Revolution, which served as a key to an understanding of most of the revolutions of the twentieth century, thus distinguishing himself not only from the Russian revolutionists, but also from those of all Europe. Nevertheless, he remained too attached to the "traditional" and inadequate organizational forms of Western social democracy to understand the necessity for the split which appeared so brutal in the eyes of the European leaders of the workers' movement. The application of Bolshevik organizational methods was needed for all Europe; even Lenin himself had not yet grasped this. Trotsky, who all his life had a horror of fatalism, and could not rest content with the empty hopes of the German leaders that the process of "evolution" would "automatically" eliminate the "extravagances" of Lenin, nevertheless struggled in practice for organizational reconciliation. That is why he permitted himself to embark on the notorious "August bloc," which was entirely hostile to his political concepts. This is the explanation for the paradox that Lenin, guided by his fierce will to achieve his goal, for a long time remained an admirer of Kautsky, although the first in his own party to break sharply with the organizational concepts of centrism. While Trotsky, whose more profound knowledge of the European working class movement enabled him to understand long before Lenin the bankruptcy of Kautskyan ideology, remained for many years the defender of centrist organization principles in Russia.

But what is characteristic of truly great men is that quality which permits them at decisive moments to go beyond their own particular limitations, raise themselves to the height of the tasks which history in a burning fashion presents to their class. This transformation was brought about "naturally," without any clashes or internal conflicts, both in Lenin and Trotsky in 1917. The same Lenin who all his life clung with superhuman obstinacy to a once-adopted position on principles, abandoned from the first day of the Russian revolution his formula of the "democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants," which was "by-passed by events," as he said, and became the fiercest partisan of the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Trotsky, the "conciliator," understood at the same moment and with the same quickness, that "unity" between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was no longer possible." (Irony of history, it was Stalin who drove him to that) and thus became, in Lenin's own words, "the best Bolshevik." Only the revolution could bring about this two-fold transformation with a minimum of difficulty, because both of them, true revolutionists that they were, felt and understood that the revolution was necessary to open the way to the victory of their class.

Trotsky has often been accused of having been too ambitious, too "personal" in his attitude toward the party, too haughty in his attitude toward the comrades. These accusations are absurd. Lenin, who possessed a psychological insight of rare quality, saw much more clearly when he

revealed the weakness as a "too pronounced attraction" on Trotsky's part "toward the administrative side of things." But even the elderly Angelica Balabanov, who too often simply takes tidbits of corridor gossip and transforms them into the motive forces of history, made this penetrating remark: "During the Revolution, at the very moment when the crowd was bearing him on their shoulders, Trotsky was able to efface more than ever before the pronounced 'personal' traits of his character. Never was the arrogance of the 'leader' more foreign to him than when all the threads for unleashing the revolution were gathered together in his hands. "With his natural tact," said Angelica, he knew how to impose the severest self-criticism when that was most necessary, and when it is nevertheless most difficult for the majority of mortals. It is here that we see the real strength of character which is at the base of every great action.

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Universal Interests

The "leitmotif which links all his works is the materialist conception of history. This "leitmotif" he employs with a mastery that is unequalled; sometimes going from the "essential reality" which is the class struggle, to the most "far-removed" manifestations of intellectual life; sometimes digging the soil, with a science confident of itself, in order to probe the profound class roots of political and ideological phenomena. To each of these tasks he brought too much passion to be able to tolerate a negligent, superficial, or *blasé* attitude toward Marxist theory. It was for him an indispensable key to the understanding of history. Thanks to this key he always made history live for us in his works. He was at one and the same time its severest critic and its most eloquent herald. But he was able to be both of these only because he understood history so well.

There is in Trotsky a complete unity of theory and practice of thought and action. Lenin poured on the renegade Kautsky the indignation of the proletariat toward one who is a traitor to their interests and their struggle for emancipation. Trotsky castigated with his contempt and bitter irony Kautsky's thinking which was in decay because divorced from action, a practice which was truly corrupt because divorced from principle. This unity between his own thought and action was most clearly revealed in revolutionary strategy and attains its highest form in the *military* strategy of the victorious proletariat. The revolutionary leader shoulders an overwhelming responsibility when he finds himself at the head of the masses; the military chief has the same responsibility, plus the added responsibility for the very short lives of the thousands of soldiers who battle under him. Apart from the cynics, the morally deranged, or the luminaries, who are mentally deranged men, in the face of such responsibilities, remain for the most part exposed to their doubts, their convictions, their wills, their capacity for making decisions. Trotsky, the outstanding military leader, possessed the additional resources of Trotsky, the revolutionary leader of the proletariat. Just as he understood how to feel the pulse of history, so with a penetrating glance he could take up a military map and determine the decisive place where all efforts should be concentrated. The resolution, the power, the steel-sharpness of his actions, spring from a clear understanding and an unshakeable conviction in the justice of the cause of the proletariat. Addressing the Red Army soldiers was for him the same as speaking on September 1917 in the *Cirque Modern* in Petrograd.

Directing the work of the staff office of the Southeastern front was only the logical continuation of his direction of the Revolutionary Military Committee; and this, in turn, logically flowed from his work on the Central Committee of the Party.

One would seek in vain in his speeches to the Army, or in his attitude at the front, for a trace of the arrogance of the saber-rattler, or of that sinister "military spirit" which betrays an absurd discipline, a sterile routine and a bureaucratic approach, the whole combined with a "strategy" which makes sport of men as it does of the cheapest material. As against all the usual generals — Stalin's present Marshals included — who see no other means of preserving the cohesion of their troops than by appealing to their lowest instincts and by the threat of the knout, Trotsky never ceased to appeal to the revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed. To pseudo-revolutionary romanticism, with its opposition to centralized coordination in battle — only the counter-balance to bourgeois discipline — he counterposed the conscious and voluntary discipline of the proletariat. On this subject he declared twenty years later: "Even during the civil war I tried within the army — even in the midst of campaigns, to give full opportunity to the Communists to discuss all military decisions. I have even discussed these decisions with the soldiers and, as I have explained in my autobiography, even with deserters." Who could reproach him for not always being able to realize this completely, since it was necessary to improvise everything in the midst of a world of enemies, and so many enemies even that he had to utilize? The essential consideration is that unity of thought and action involves a comprehension of that dialectical interaction between the means and the end which guides every true revolutionist in his acts, by his desire above all to achieve the raising of the consciousness of his own class.

Soldier of Revolution

This soldier of the Revolution differed very much from the image drawn of him not only by his enemies, but also by not a few of his admirers. The Hungarian White Guards in a celebrated caricature have represented him as a Red Lion, seated on a gigantic pyramid of skulls. On the other side, Karl Mayer tells us that at bottom he had in him a certain gentleness whose origin undoubtedly was an intelligence which seemed capable of understanding everything. This gentleness is seen again in his last words where, after expressing his confidence in the victory of our movement, he adds that all his life he has struggled for a society which would be free of all violence.

And how could it be otherwise? In the heart of every true Marxist is a belief in man, without which all revolutionary activity is devoid of meaning. Throughout the last 20 years of his life, years of battling in retreat, of struggle against infamy, calumny, the growing degradation of humanity, he maintained that unshaken faith, without being ensnared by illusions, and retaining to the end his magnificent clear-sightedness. He liked to repeat that man's climb from the semi-ape stage has been long and arduous but that nevertheless no little progress has been achieved. And how well he knew how to scorn professional pessimists who are always trying to avenge themselves on humanity for their own illusions. All life ends in death, he said, but nevertheless statistics are constantly proving that men do not for this reason stop coming into the world.

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His whole past and his whole character thus predestined him to become the standard-bearer of the opposition against the nascent bureaucracy in the USSR. Even when he was living at the Kremlin, the thick stone walls never separated him from the life of the masses. Even while in power, his ear was attuned to all the expressions of humor, criticism, and dissatisfaction of the workers. With that conspicuous gift for generalization characteristic of him, he was able, beginning with 1923, to discern underneath that murmur of dissatisfaction, the beginning of a gigantic realignment of historic forces. In this realignment of forces, his place was predestined in advance. How he must have scorned those who ceased to be conscious builders of history in order to become transmission belts for hostile social forces. And how pitiful must have appeared to him the conservatism of those who satisfied their ambitions by driving to their offices in a limousine! His own "ambition" embraced a vaster purpose: The revolutionary emancipation of the world proletariat! When the political orientation of the Kremlin began to deviate from that aim, he parted company with it in the same natural manner with which all his life he has known how to attune his actions to his convictions. "The error" with which so many superficial critics reproached him, of having "hesitated" to "struggle for power" in 1923, is in reality an additional expression of that inherent quality; never to act contrary to his convictions. The usurpation of power by the bureaucracy was by itself an indication for the Left Opposition of the ebbing forces of the Revolution. To struggle "for power" in a period of the passivity of the masses, is the work of adventurers and standard-bearers of reaction; even if these people occasionally hide themselves in the folds of a revolutionary flag of the past. For those who conceive of "power" only as deriving from the revolutionary assault of the masses, the tasks in the period of reaction were determined as those of preserving the revolutionary traditions, of maintaining contact among the advanced elements of the party, of analyzing the developments of (*the Soviet Russian*) 'Thermidor' (*a reference to the month of the counter-revolution of the French Revolution c.1793-4 --Ed.*) thus preparing the future revolutionary wave on the world arena as well as in the USSR. These are the tasks which the Left Opposition, (*founded by Trotsky in 1938 --Ed.*) and the world cadres of the Fourth International which have sprung from it, have without respite tried to accomplish under Trotsky's leadership.

Thus was Trotsky: every one of his acts was completely conscious! Replying to a question of the French novelist Tatayans who was questioning him regarding his "idea on happiness," Trotsky replied: "To think — to write — to realize one's ideas." It is thus that he lived in his hotel rooms in Paris, in the salons of the Kremlin, in the semi-prisons of his third emigration, and in that sunny field where death finally felled him. Indifferent to the vicissitudes of the material conditions of life, his genius ripened, his thought clarified, his style was enriched and simplified along a straight line. His life in itself is thus a monument of conscience, a monument to the future man, the man who will be set completely free of material servitude, and who will no longer live alienated from his own nature.

Authentic Marxism

(...) Trotskyism appears today with its own specific traits, as a broadening of the teaching of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Trotskyism is *the Marxism of our epoch*, and that in the profoundest sense of the word (*emphasis by the author*).

The chief merit of Trotsky from the point of view of the history of ideas consists in this: he has literally preserved Marxism in the midst of a general recession in the workers' movement and of a complete degeneration of the traditional parties and ideologies. Without yielding an inch, he has preserved the Leninist heritage, on the theoretical as well as the tactical plane, against the enveloping movements of the epigones of Lenin and the scribes of Stalin. With the same tenacity, he defended this heritage against the feeble yet incessant frontal attacks of reformism and centrism.

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Like any method of investigation and systemization of the facts of experience, Marxism can be maintained only on condition that it be continually enriched. Any attempt to fall back defensively on "tradition," without any effort to encompass the new developments which are continually taking place through the sieve of the materialist dialectic, is certain to bring about a fatal ossification of the theory and to end in its certain death. Trotsky's represents the only serious effort to interpret in the light of Marxism those disconcerting phenomena of the last three decades, namely: The development of fascism, the usurpation of power in the USSR by the bureaucracy, the zig-zag evolution of soviet economy, the monstrously accelerated decay of the capitalist world, and the general crisis in the revolutionary leadership of the proletariat. Lenin had advanced and enriched the heritage of Marx by his study of imperialism, of the world war, and of the first revolutionary wave. His work is Marxism in the epoch of the rise of imperialism and of the October revolution. On Trotsky has fallen the heavy task of enriching the heritage of Marx and Lenin in the epoch of reaction and triumphant counter-revolution. He has thus continued the tradition with the same implacable clarity, the same breadth of vision, the same sharpness of analysis possessed by those who preceded him.

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Lenin, for his part, made a tremendous effort to state precisely and demarcate the role of the *subjective factor*: the importance of the party, the formation of the vanguard, its relationship with the class. These efforts, combined with a precise and systematic *tactic of struggle*, which was principled, realistic, and revolutionary, are considered by us today, and deservedly, to have a universal application; Lenin, however, at least up to 1914, limited his vision to the Russian Social Democracy. Beginning with the downfall of the Second International, however, his field of action rapidly broadened. He became the educator of the whole world proletariat. His writings on the strategy of *revolutionary defeatism*, (*i.e., no support for the imperialist war, for the defeat of the national bourgeoisie -- Web Ed.*) on the building of revolutionary parties, on the tactics of the united front, on national and colonial questions, as well as the whole of his practical activity during and after the Russian Revolution, constitute the most precious teaching that the proletariat possesses for the elaboration of a revolutionary policy. Nevertheless, Lenin's experience was limited to the Russian revolution and to the first stage of the German revolution. Subsequent experience has shown that the general study of the subjective factor, of the role and policy of the revolutionary party — which constitutes Lenin's contribution to contemporary Marxism — has to be completed by a special study of *the internal laws of the development of the proletarian revolution*, of the mechanism of revolution, and of the tactic of the revolutionary party with a view to the conquest of power. This indispensable complement to Marxism, this "science of revolution" in the double sense of the word, could be systematically elaborated only on the basis of a wider revolutionary experience than that of 1917. Trotsky made a brilliant beginning in (*his two books*) *Lessons of October* and *The Communist International after Lenin*. He has more precisely elaborated it to the point where it

now exists in exact outline form, in his (*two later books*) *Permanent Revolution*, his *History of the Russian Revolution*, and his writings on the subject of Germany, France, and Spain between 1930 and 1938. The substance of this historically important work is to be found in the programmatic writings of the Fourth International. Thus these represent not only the heritage of Marx and Lenin, the teachings of the *Communist Manifesto*, of *Capital*, of *What is to be Done?*, (*and of*) *Imperialism* and the *First Four Congresses of the Communist International*, but also of 30 years of proletarian victories and defeats in an epoch when the world was constantly swinging between revolution and counter-revolution (*book titles and emphasis by the author*).

Lenin educated three generations of Russian worker-militants in the art of building the revolutionary party and the principled development of its political tactics. But only in 1917 did he arrive at a clear understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Most of the leaders of the Bolshevik Party were unable for their part to assimilate the lessons of October 1917. No more did the revolutionary militants who came to the Comintern in 1919 have an understanding of these lessons on the basis of their own individual development, heavily handicapped as they were by the "peaceful" development of the prewar years, their isolation during the hostilities, the too rapid and tumultuous unfoldment (*unravelling --Ed.*) of the post-war revolutionary wave. The subsequent development of this vanguard was completely blocked by the degeneration of the Third International beginning with 1923 — the most nefarious crime of Stalinism against the world proletariat. In place of a selection of a revolutionary leadership on the basis of its political maturity, there occurred a reverse selection, on the basis of servility and obedience to the Kremlin. When the Trotskyists were excluded from the C.I. (*Communist International or 'Comintern', the body of world Communist parties --Web Ed.*) everything had to be started all over again. The building of a new revolutionary vanguard was begun, one that was capable of acting in accordance with the lessons of the October victory and the subsequent defeats. It was to this task that Trotsky devoted most of his time. It is the accomplishment of this task which will have the greatest influence on the future course of history.

This building of a new revolutionary vanguard was undertaken under the most difficult conditions, at a time when the world working class movement was dragged into a long series of defeats. Thus of necessity, it was a movement "against the current." Around the *living Marxism*, personified by Trotsky, were gathered above all those elements who had not been discouraged by the defeats. These were always the most fearless, but were not always the best. Those, who because of their more intimate ties with the proletariat, reflected the illusions and discouragements of the class, did not enter our ranks. Those who never succeeded in integrating themselves in the mass movement came with less hesitation to the small handful of outcasts. The education of this vanguard too often took the form of a literary and academic exercise, for the only real school of revolutionary strategy is in active participation in the *revolutionary* movement of the *masses*. The vanguard, due to its isolation, developed a number of defects, characteristic of a whole period of recession: excessive factionalism, sectarianism, the presumptuousness of the intellectual with its inevitable corollary, professional proletarianism. Work was directed inward and political discussions, indispensable to any healthy organization, took on a too abstract character, rarely consisting of a critical review of tactical concepts in the light of their *concrete* application to the workers' struggle. Moreover, in

Europe as well as in the USSR and the Far East, Fascist, Stalinist, and Imperialist terror implacably mowed down the most courageous and capable of our cadres, thus destroying at each turn the *continuity* in education and experience of this new vanguard. All these factors which expressed themselves differently in different countries, can be summed up thus: *Since a genuine revolutionary vanguard can be built only in close contact with the activity of the class, and a genuine revolutionary policy can only be elaborated in contact and under the critical eye of the masses*, we possessed in most countries at the close of the period of recession only groups of cadres, only skeleton organizations. But the first test, that of the war, has shown how effective was this necessary preparation. Some people may have deserted; here and there human material may have shown itself to be too weak; new groups of revolutionists have had to take up the torch in not a few countries, *but everywhere the basic policy was formulated, a common line was elaborated, the same method of organization was applied*, thanks to the program, tradition, and the cadres which Trotsky had created in the years before the war. On the basis of the program he elaborated are gathered together all those who desire to build genuine revolutionary parties. The tradition which he first began in the history of the working class movement is that of a genuine world leadership which is more than merely the sum total of the national leaderships, or the authority of one organization leading in its wake all the others. Thereby, one of the essential causes of early Comintern weakness might have been avoided and supplementary guarantees provided for the harmonious development of our movement (*emphasis by the author -- Web Ed.*)

At the time that the Fourth International was founded, Trotsky predicted that it would count millions of partisans within ten years. Sarcastic critics maliciously enjoy citing this prognosis and asking where these millions are. But historic predictions are not payable on a certain date like bills. The historic process has developed more slowly than Trotsky anticipated but it has developed along the same line. In countries like France, India, United States, Bolivia, we count tens of thousands of workers and poor peasants who sympathize with our ideas, and on the world arena, there are already, without doubt, several hundreds of thousands. They are still few enough compared with the forces necessary to bring our work to fruition; but it is even now an impressive army compared to our feeble forces of 1938. The first important wave of worker's struggles in France was sufficient for organs as diverse, but equally hostile to our movement, as the Stalinist (*French CP journal*) *L'Humanité* and Henry Luce's *Time* magazine, to discover "Trotsky's shadow" projecting itself upon events. This alone is sufficient to imbue us with confidence.

We very strongly doubt that we shall meet our critics again in the next stage!
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